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AUTHOR	Harrison, Geoff
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ABSTRACT

Historically, whitewater kayaking has been a key component of some institutional outdoor programs, offering low-cost instruction that emphasizes safety, skill, and the spirit of down-river travel. Each year, several thousand students are introduced to the sport of kayaking through instructional seminars offered by university outdoor programs. Classic teaching boats were long and skinny and had round bottoms. They rolled easily and offered excellent stability on their sides. Many programs found these boats increased participants' confidence and helped them stay with the sport after instruction. During the 1990s, whitewater kayaking saw exponential growth due to strong economic times and mass-market appeal. Boat designs followed the growing sport of rodeo "play-boating," and had features intended to make freestyle kayak moves possible. Long boats with round displacement hulls were replaced by their short, flat-bottom descendants. In addition, retail prices of boats increased because of additional design costs. This rapid growth left many program directors wondering where their instructional programs fit into the matrix of industry standards. Eventually, all institutional kayaking programs will need to upgrade their current equipment inventory. Program staff must reexamine its teaching philosophy and restructure the instructional curriculum to capitalize on the advantages and accommodate the limitations of the new equipment. (TD)

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The Growth Of River Kayaking And Its Indirect Effect On Institutional Whitewater Programs

By

Geoff Harrison

Abstract

Institutional whitewater kayaking programs have historically been a key component of the learning process by offering low cost instruction that emphasized safety, skill, and the spirit of down river travel. During the 1990's, whitewater kayaking, similar to other sports, saw an exponential level of participant growth due to strong economic times and a mass-market media appeal. The infusion of money generated from the growth stimulated a renaissance of designs. The rapid growth of the sport has become a challenge for many institutional kayaking programs because many of the boats that were once regarded as classic teaching boats are no longer available for purchase thereby negating their appeal to the learner. This shift has made it difficult for many programs to identify good teaching boats within the sea of small boats that are taking the sport into new directions.
This paper reviews the evolution of kayaking and the current role of institutional whitewater instructional programs in the sport today.

Evolution of the whitewater kayaking industry

The sport of whitewater kayaking in the United States began within small circles of adventurous friends and explorers. At its inception, the focus of the sport was on exploring river canyons that were historically impassable by conventional vessels. A growing number of home-made, and a limited number of commercially produced, fiberglass kayaks cascaded and crashed down rivers in the East, Rockies, and Sierras.

Whitewater kayaking began to garner public appeal in the mid-seventies with a few television series that documented early descents of major river explorations. Pioneers like Walt Blackadar, Cully Erdman, Royal Robbins, Don Banducci, and Lars Holbeck helped to propel the sport into the public spot light.
Participation in the sport was generally limited to a few individuals in each community until the 1990's. With an incredibly strong domestic economy, large disposable incomes, more national leisure time, and large numbers of single people in their 20's & 30's made participation in adrenaline based sports like kayaking sky rocket. Sports like snowboarding, wind surfing, and mountain biking also flourished during this era. Increased consumer consumption created the

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economic base for these industries to grow. Like other industries, kayaking had the money to invest in computer aided design programs and the innovation process gathered speed.

Evolution of boat designs

In the late 1970's a few commercial companies began to produce plastic, round hulled, boats that were able to withstand the abuse of river exploration. The industry, while in its infancy, supported two or three boat designs but only saw major innovations every three to five years. Classic boat designs like the Dancer and Corsica remained cutting edge for about 10 years.

The dimensions of early kayak designs were structured around the international standards for whitewater slalom competitions. However, on the slalom kayak circuit, boaters began to modify the volume of their fiberglass boats so they could master the squirt or pivot turn. These minor modifications to the original designs allowed the paddlers to do a variety of flashy tricks before races and at the early whitewater rodeos. These competitions lit the pathway to technical innovations. Boats began to be designed to make particular tricks easier for a variety of paddlers. Shapes changed and boats began to shrink in size. The first radical departure from classic boat design was the German made Prijon Hurricane; the boat was a shorter version of their 1992 winning slalom design. The Hurricane possessed lots of rocker, centralized cockpit volume and a thin, flat tail. This design excelled at both down river exploration and rodeo competitions. At this point in time the American manufacturers, departed from the classic shape and introduced their version of the German boat.

In the 1990's, kayaking began to receive an infusion of young and ambitious new paddlers. Virgin descents of remote rivers began to be run by these new paddlers. Shorter high volume creek boats and shorter low volume play boats began to appear on the scene. Dagger's release of the RPM signaled the end of traditional boat designs. The RPM was an all conditions boat that was beginner friendly, excelled at rodeo competitions, and was predictable enough to run harder rivers. At the time the RPM was introduced a small East Coast company called Savage released a radical boat called the Fury. This boat had a flat bottom, pointy upturned bow, and a wide flat tail. The Fury's strange shape allowed the boat's hull to plane on a wave and perform 360° spins on the face of both river and ocean waves. This unconventional design completely changed the kayaking industry by introducing the planning hull concept.

Play boat designs

The boats in this category represent the state of the art in competition rodeo boats. They are specifically designed to aid the paddler in mastering contemporary tricks. These boats come in a variety of sizes and have flat planning hulls, sharp rails, thin ends and centralized volume. These features allow the boat to remain retentive in a hydraulic and to spin effortlessly on the face of a wave.

Creek boat designs

The boats in this class are designed to protect the boater while running hard whitewater. Stable and predictable in hard whitewater these boats are designed with many safety features. They are typically short high volume boats that are intended to resurface quickly after big drops. Both planning and displacement hulls are used in these designs.

Tweener boat designs

The boats that bridge the gap between big teaching boats and super low volume play boats can be termed Tweener boats. As they bridge the gap between the old and new, they try to incorporate the performance traits of both big and small boats. They are intended to be highly responsive but forgiving. Tweeners typically have a flat planning hull with a higher peaked deck shape that sheds water and help the boat resurface. These boats are intended to be good at wave surfing and general down river travel.

Institutional kayaking programs

Paddlers seem to have always learned to boat from, either the school of hard knocks, a friend, professional kayak school or an institutional outdoor program. Learning through an outdoor program has traditionally been a low cost way of getting into the sport. Each individual outdoor program teaches kayaking skills that are based around the program's philosophy of the sport.

Recently, the Outdoor Program at Boise State University surveyed a total of 40 universities in the United States and Canada to quantify the number of students being taught kayaking and to identify the type of teaching boats being used by these programs.
During the 1999-2000 school year, these 40 programs taught a total of 757 instructional kayak classes to 6,809 students. The programs interviewed were selected because they taught a minimum of 2-3 classes per year and taught classes that were longer than one session in length. Each program was also asked to identify the hull type and models of boats in their fleet. Hull types were broken down into three categories: Displacement hull boats are the traditional round bottomed boats, Planning hull boats are the contemporary flat bottom kayaks that are currently in production, Transitional boats represent a combined fleet of planning and displacement hull boats.

Of the 40 programs interviewed, 23 maintained a fleet of transitional or planning hull boats. These programs taught 514 classes to 4,421 students last year. The boats used by these programs ranged from high volume flat-bottomed creek boats to low volume play boats. Boat style ranged from conservative models like Pyrahna's H2zone series to radical models like Wave Sports XXX. Many of the instructional programs in this segment of the survey represented recently formed outdoor programs. The majority of the schools in this segment transitioned to planning hull boats in between 1998-1999.

17 of the 40 programs inventoried maintained a classic fleet of boats. These programs taught 243 classes to 2,388 students last year. Most of these programs have been offering instructional programs for many years and have been slow to purchase contemporary boats. Reasons for not upgrading their fleets ranged from budget limitations to teaching philosophies. Many of the program directors believe that contemporary boat styles make it difficult for the beginning kayaker to build confidence in themselves and their newly acquired skills.

Teaching boats

Classic teaching boats were long and skinny. They had round bottoms that lacked primary stability but offered the paddlers excellent stability on their sides. They roll easily and offered confidence to the learner. These relatively user-friendly designs had low deck height, which limited the size range of paddlers. Many programs found these boats increased participant's

perception of confidence and helped in getting the students to stay with the sport after their instruction. For many years, the classic teaching boats resembled the boats being sold at retail shops. This created a quiet partnership between the industry and the instructional program. Students were able to learn in a particular boat and then go purchase a similar one at the local paddle sports retailer. The slow evolution of designs worked well with institutional budget constraints. Programs could buy 2 boats a year and rotate a fleet every 5-6 years.
As the sport grew in the mid 1990's, boat design concepts followed the growing sport of rodeo playboating. The boats produced during this period had features, shapes and sizes that were intended to make freestyle kayak moves possible to the general paddling population. This shift away from a traditional river running focus sold lots of boats for the manufacturers and pushed them to continue producing better play boat designs. Soon the river running designs began to have play boat features integrated into their design. Long boats with round displacement hulls became a thing of the past and were replaced by their short and flat bottom descendants.

The rapid evolution of the sport left most institutional whitewater programs with philosophical and financial struggles. The big questions centered around what the best boats were for new paddlers and how the institution could integrate new boats into their current instructional program. With a length variation of 2-3 feet, the new boats perform most skills differently than their longer counterparts; they are typically faster turning and more responsive. These traits can both help and hinder a new paddler. Since the boats perform differently, the instructor is challenged to keep their students at an equal progression.

Price structure

Institutional programs are typically able to purchase their boats on special discount programs. During the 1980's and early 1990's the actual price of a boat purchased for a school program varied from company to company but averaged about $400. Boat prices remained the same for a long time because boat companies were only developing a few new boats at a time, thereby keeping their research and design costs to a minimum. With the recent rapid growth in the sport, boat manufacturers have been pressured to release several new boats each year in an effort to maintain their market share. In a relatively short period of time, the retail prices of boats have increased by 1/3 because of the additional design costs. Indirectly, this growth has increased the discounted price that an institution pays for each boat. In the past few years, institutional boat prices have been closer to $650.00. This elevated cost has been a challenge for many programs to rotate their boat inventory.

At the 2002 summer Outdoor Retailer Trade Show, many of the manufacturers unveiled new price point retail boat models. . Wave Sport, Perception, Pyrahna, and Dagger recognized the sudden rise in retail boat costs and decided to lower the price on several of the older models that have proven to be successful items. In addition to the new price structure the manufacturers have created a few new boats that are intended to be more beginner friendly. These boats, similar to their playboat relatives, have flat planning hulls however, they lack a play boats low volume and concave deck. The decks on these new designs are intended to shed water and remain above the surface. These new designs mark a departure from the non-user friendly play boats that have been produced over the past several years and should aid the instructional program in making the transition to teaching in modern boats.

Summary

Whitewater kayaking is a rapidly evolving sport that has recently seen a renaissance of boat designs and an exponential growth in participation numbers. Each year, several thousand students are introduced to the sport of kayaking through instructional seminars that are offered by university outdoor programs.

The rapid growth of the sport has left many program directors wondering where their instructional programs fit into the matrix of industry standards. While many programs have joined the new age of boating by integrating modern boat designs into their teaching programs, many have been left contemplating the value of new designs versus their classic equipment. At many university outdoor programs both philosophical and financial reasons have limited the use of modern boats in their beginning kayaking programs.

Eventually, all institutional kayaking programs will need to upgrade their current equipment inventory. The values of modern equipment should only be integrated into instructional kayaking programs after the program staff has re-examined its teaching philosophy and has restructured the instructional curriculum to capitalize on the advantages and accommodate the limitations offered by the new equipment.

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Biography

Geoff Harrison works for Campus Recreation at Boise State University and runs the university outdoor programs. He learned to kayak as a university student and has been an avid kayaker for the past 12 years. His passion for kayaking has him on the water 12 months a year and has enabled him to explore rivers through out the United States and Central America.

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